

JAPANESE ARISAEMAS

Part II

**Guy Gusman, a Belgian Member, continues his exploration of
the fascinating world of the Japanese cobra-lilies**

There are many more appealing Japanese species besides the ones I described in my first article (see the March *Bulletin* 1997) and of course the Subject is far from being exhausted in just two articles. In the first part I examined the species of section *Pedatisecta*, the '*serratum*-like' ones. I now turn to another group in the same section, the '*sikokianum*-like' species whose general appearance is closer to *A. sikokianum* than it is to *A. serratum*.

Of course, if I follow my general guideline, I must start with *A. sikokianum* Fr. et Sav, but it is certainly, pointless to describe in detail such a well known and familiar species. Nevertheless, some added details can be about the leaves for they are not always 'unexceptional'. Japanese collectors are fond of cultivars with striped or spotted leaves and such variation is the origin of special collections of miniature palms or *Kannonchiku* (*Raphis excelsa*), and various orchids including *Calanthe*. In a nursery in the centre of Kyoto, I bought a specimen of *A. sikokianum* whose attractive serrated and variegated leaflets were decorated with a broad whitish central pattern as if they had been painted with a brush. For this reason it was exhibited and highly prized. Amazingly, the majority of wild variegated arisaemas are to be found in Japan. Later, in the central part of Shikoku, I came across a colony of *A. sikokianum* with rather different, unusual, cream spotted leaves similar to those of the Chinese *A. lobatum* seen on Mt Omei (Emei Shan) in Sichuan. Well, *A. sikokianum* is certainly one of the most striking species and unquestionably one of outstanding garden value.

I now want to tackle the near-mythical and much rarer species, *A. sazensoo* (Blume) Makino, which is closely related to *A. sikokianum*. I would emphasise the 'related to' *A. sikokianum*: it is not 'synonymous with' as some authors insist! The first time I asked Japanese friends to send *A. sazensoo* (Blume) Makino the answer came that it and *A. sikokianum* were one and the same thing. Ohwi's 'Flora of Japan' includes them as distinct species and even the photographs are not identical. They are obviously different and, moreover, they do not share the same habitat. To my knowledge, plants of *A. sikokianum* are not to be found on the island of Kyushu. However, *A. sazensoo* is and, as I mentioned in the previous article, it can be found growing on Mt Unzen together with *A. maximowiczii*.

Near Mt Kirishima, in the southern part of Shikoku, which is also the habitat of the rare *Malus halliana* var. *spontanea* (Mak.) Koidz. (protected as a National monument) I came across *A. sazensoo* for the second time. In the Ebinokogen park, an area full of azaleas and covered with a beautiful forest and strewn with lakes and hot springs, I experienced one of the heaviest rains of my Asian travels. At the end of the afternoon, the mist was so dense that it was impossible to walk around without running a serious risk of getting lost. Owing to the brightness of some marvellously variegated-leaved specimens growing by the roadside and despite the bad weather, it was easy to spot *A. sazensoo* or *Kirishima-tennanshō* (the arisaema of Kirishima). It is a rather stocky plant, with a short pseudostem 5 to 12 cm long, and one or two leaves which can sometimes be plain green. From a distance this species could be readily mistaken for *A. sikokianum* but the biggest leaf of *A. sazensoo* generally has seven leaflets (*A. sikokianum* never has more than five), the central one borne on a rather long petiolule (a secondary petiole). More importantly, the inflorescences of the two species are completely different. The spathe of *A. sazensoo* is dark purplish throughout with white stripes and the limb extends over the tube like a helmet in the style of the Chinese *A. franchetianum*. The spadix appendage is cylindrical, erect and pinkish, but lacks the characteristic club-shaped apex of *A. sikokianum*. The mystery was solved. To my knowledge, this mistake in identification finds its written origin in Engler's 'Das Pflanzenreich' and it is amusing to note that some 75 years later, the confusion between *A. sikokianum* and *A. sazensoo* still exists and is regularly reproduced.

What is sure is that *A. sikokianum* is a Japanese species, to be found only on Shikoku. I do not think it exists in Korea and certainly have not seen it there. As it has not been authentically recorded from

Kyushu, it is doubtful that the plant is to be found on Taiwan or in neighbouring China. Any comments or further information would be most welcome.

On the other hand, *A. sazensoo* thrives on Kyushu and its habitat extends, via the Kuriles, towards continental eastern China. On the Wudang Shan, in Hubei province, the so-called *A. sazensoo* var. *magnidens* can be found and it is nicely illustrated in Roy Lancaster's book 'Travels in China' but alas in the text (page 407), the picture is referred to as *A. sikokianum* var. *serratum*. At least it is sure that *A. sazensoo* is an extremely polymorphic species (as are many arisaemas) whose habitat extends from Southwestern Japan (Kyushu) to southeastern China.

Green-spathed specimens of *A. sazensoo*, called *Midori-hime-tennanshō* (midori means green), are reported on Yakushima, the southernmost point reached in Japan. This place is well known mainly because of the famous *Rhododendron yakushmanum*. Yakushima island, located between Kyushu and Okinawa, is rightly renowned for its wonderful primeval forest which is mainly composed of centuries-old cryptomerias or *Yaku-sugi*; they are so old that they are protected as Natural Monuments. This fantastic forest fills the volcano crater of Mt Miyanoura, which peaks at 1935 m, the highest point in all southern Japan. On the way down, in light rain (the island has one of the wettest climates in Japan), I was able to observe specimens of *A. sazensoo*. What was surprising was the contrast in colour between the short pseudostem and peduncle, the long 'bloomy' petiolules (all dark purple) and the plain green leaves, the largest bearing nine broad-obovate leaflets: the spathe was the usual purple. These plants thrive in the vicinity of an interesting endemic form of *A. serratum*, previously called, for this reason, *A. yakusimense*, which also has a white-striped purple spathe but it has a very different look with its long pseudostem, the inflorescence opening before the leaves unfold.

Before leaving Kyushu I would like to take the reader to the north-east of the island. This region of volcanic peaks is renowned for its dramatic landscapes which are scattered

OPPOSITE: *Arisaema sikokianum* in cultivation showing different leaf forms

Photo: AGS Slide Library/Mike Ireland

Arisaema kishidae Photo: Guy Gusman

with rock-carved Buddha images and temples. One of those, the Rakan-Ji, is a cluster of chapels excavated in the mountain cliff,. Its top is reached by a rope-way and there, in the highest grotto, we came in front of a nice sculpture of the Buddha completely surrounded by thousands of flowering 'king-sized' plants of *Conandron ramondoides* overlapping on the dripping rock walls.

Not far from the temple, near the summit of Hikosan, there is an uncommon alpine-like atmosphere with mossy boulders under a canopy of deciduous trees. This is the habitat of another unusual arisaema, *A. ternatipartitum*: unusual for it is one of the few stoloniferous arisaemas! The small tuber sends out a 20 cm whitish stolon whose function is to produce a new corm at their tips. The plant has a small pseudostem which bears two 3-foliolate leaves (hence its Latin name). The leaflet margin is very peculiar when unfolding with its small papilliae-like brown spots, but apart from these the plant is plain green. However, the most spectacular and distinct character is, once more, the fact that the inflorescences are fully developed before the leaves unfold. Hence a group of *A. ternatipartitum* has the same 'meerkats' aspect as a group of the Japanese *A. linbatum* var. *ionostemma* or of the Himalayan *A. nepenthoides*: a lot of erect stalks with red flowers. *A. ternatipartitum* is said to be found also on the islands of Shikoku and Honshu. Out of flower, *A. ternatipartitum* could at first glance be confused with *A. ringens*, another 3-foliolate species which also has a short pseudostem and two leaves on long petioles. I will not elaborate on *A. ringens* here for this species is very well known and easy to find in the trade. It is worth mentioning that the two species have completely different inflorescences so that they cannot be confused. Moreover in the wild they do not mix: *A. ringens* mainly grows near the seaside while *A. ternatipartitum* is confined to mountain forests.

The most widespread species on the island of Shikoku is *A. tosaense* Makino, named in Japanese *Ao-tennanshō* because the plant and the flower are completely green (*ao* also means green). Despite the colour uniformity, this medium-sized plant, some 40-50 cm high, is very attractive and its general

appearance is intermediate between *A. serratum* and *A. sikokianum*: the spathe-limb as well as the leaflets end in a very long tail that are reminiscent of the nicest forms of *A. consanguinem*. Moreover, as in *A. maximowiczii* the spathe limb is translucent and the cylindrical, thick spongy spadix appendage can easily be seen through it. The leaves have 7-15 leaflets and are generally broad and serrate, decreasing in size away from the centre. Some of the lateral leaflets may be partly fused together. The spathe is borne at the same level as the leaves.

Arisaema ternatipartitum Photo: Guy Gusman

To complete our journey I return the reader to the starting point, Honshu, taking the bridge from Shikoku to Awaji, a small fisherfolks island. From there a ferry carries one away to the Kii peninsula or Kii-shima, to the South of Nara. This area is famous for its collection of Buddhist temples and a cemetery where many important people are buried. Called Koyasan, Mt Koya (850 m) is a raised tableland completely covered with a thick *Cryptomeria* forest, full of mist and mosquitoes. As it is often the case in Japan such remote places are found in the vicinity of giant cities like Osaka. Their presence is certainly vital for the busy Japanese citizens who find there not just a resort but evidence of the traditional Japanese way of life. Koya is full of temples where one can spend (be careful to book accommodation well in advance!) some nights in pilgrim's lodgings. The small town is built at the summit of the mountain and benefits from the rather cool conditions in summer, but it is cold and snowy in the winter. It is the native country of *A. kishidae* Makino ex Nakai, the last species to include in this article. In the forest of Koya itself, it is a plant of modest size, some 30-40 cm tall. On a 20 cm pseudostem, there are two leaves with seven to nine leaflets on a rachis. The spathe and the leaves expand at the same time. The spathe tube and the limb are reddish and white striped and the spadix-appendage is purple-dotted, the limb ending in a long dark tail, which is at first erect but later droops over the tube mouth.

While on the way to visit the greatest waterfall in Japan, the Nachi falls, I passed through a forest where a puzzling colony of arisaemas, tall plants with wide overlapping and white brushed leaflets, was at first mistaken for *A. sikokianum*. However, their seven to nine leaflets and their reddish flowers quickly showed that they were healthy specimens of *A. kishidae*, flourishing in the damp environment of the trees and the deep litter of leaves and cryptomeria needles.

This brings to an end this visit to Japan but if this trip is imaginary, these bewitching species are perfectly real and our western gardens would greatly benefit from being furnished with some of them. They are very easy to raise from seeds when available, and flowering sized plants can usually be achieved in three to five years. Colonies of the species should be grown in the same corner of the garden in order to acquire plenty of seeds. However, do not forget the paradioecious character of the plants which can change sex from male to female from one year to another. This explains why in some years a lot of seeds are produced and care needs to be taken to keep plants of different levels of vigour in the colony, for only the more robust will be female or bisexual, depending on the species.

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